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Reagan Ordered Sweeping FBI Probe of Staff for Source of Leak

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President Reagan secretly has ordered a Justice Department investigation of his senior White House staff, Cabinet officers and foreign policy advisers about news stories that he was told had disclosed vital U.S. military and diplomatic strategy in Lebanon, administration officials said yesterday.

The officials said Reagan launched the investigation nine weeks ago in a letter to Attorney General William French Smith

requesting that he use "all legal means" to find the sources of the stories in The Washington Post and on the three major television networks.

The stories reported details from meetings of the National Security Council on Sept. 10 and 11, in which the president and senior officials discussed the progress of negotiations in Lebanon and steps that could be taken to protect U.S. Marines there.

As part of the sweeping Justice Department investigation, which one official said

is "still red hot," the FBI has questioned senior officials in the White House, the National Security Council, the Defense Department and the CIA, including everyone who attended the Sept. 11 NSC meeting.

Those interviewed by the FBI include former national security affairs adviser William P. Clark, White House chief of staff James A. Baker III, Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, Secretary of State George P. Shultz and CIA Director William J. Casey.

In the first news reports that triggered the investigation, the television networks reported on the evening of Sept. 12 that Robert C. McFarlane, then Reagan's special envoy to the Middle East, had recommended U.S. air strikes against Syrian positions in Lebanon to protect the Marine peace-keeping force stationed in Beirut. The Washington Post then reported the next morning that Reagan had authorized air strikes against forces shelling the Marines.

Clark was described as "damned angry" about the leaks and told Reagan on the

morning of Sept. 13 that the news stories had jeopardized McFarlane's efforts to obtain a cease-fire in Lebanon and possibly endangered McFarlane's life. McFarlane since has become White House national security affairs adviser, replacing Clark, who is now the secretary of the interior.

Administration officials had regarded the Sept. 11 National Security Council meeting, conducted under tight security on a Sunday afternoon at the White House, as

extraordinarily sensitive and were surprised and irritated to see the reports about it.

Reagan, who has complained often about news leaks whenever an unfavorable story has appeared, was described as sharing the anger and concern of Clark and others. After watching the Sept. 12 television reports and hearing a report from Clark about The Post's article the next morning, Reagan readily agreed to conduct an investigation.

He assembled his senior advisers on Sept. 13 to draft the letter that would subject them to a federal investigation. These advisers, several of whom had often accused each other of being responsible for leaks, all said at the time that they were not the sources of the stories about Lebanon. Then they argued about the language of the letter.

As originally drafted by Clark and presented to the president, the letter authorized an investigation of the source of the leaks by the "use of all lawful means—including the polygraph."

White House chief of staff Baker, a frequent adversary of Clark on many issues, objected to the reference to lie detector tests, according to sources familiar with the meeting. A discussion ensued in which others contended that the specific language

was unimportant because the FBI would be able to use polygraph tests anyway if the president determined that national security had been violated.

According to the sources, the final version of the letter declared that an unauthorized disclosure of highly sensitive information had been made, that national security issues were at stake, and that the investigation should be pursued by "all legal means."

Attorney General Smith, FBI Director William H. Webster and the principal subjects of the investigation all declined to comment when asked about the investigation. But it was learned that the FBI had questioned most members of the White House senior staff and a number of middle-level and junior officials.

In addition to Baker, Clark, Shultz, Weinberger and Casey, those questioned include presidential assistant Richard G. Darman, White House communications director David R. Gergen and White House spokesman Larry Speakes. Gergen and Speakes were not considered prime targets of the investigation, according to the sources, because they were not allowed to attend the National Security Council meetings.

Those questioned by the FBI were warned that the investigation itself was classified and that any disclosure could carry serious consequences.

Weinberger, like others, also declined to comment on the investigation or even to confirm its existence. But he did confirm that there was concern in the administration early in September that news stories could put McFarlane "at greater risk" and that media disclosure of U.S. strategy in Lebanon could make diplomacy less likely to succeed.

Some officials took the investigation in stride and one said, "It's just one more inquiry that won't find an